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ABSTRACT

"Think Big" is a thematic literary unit, using literature about elephants in a holistic way and attempting to cross the curriculum into the content areas of science and math. It is a way of expanding the basal reading series and providing appropriate and supportive instruction in a cooperative, more interactive learning environment. To assess what students already knew and to stimulate interest, students were informally given an elephant fact test and brainstormed about elephants. After reading non-fiction books about elephants, the factual information was confirmed and reviewed by use of cloze procedure, semantic mapping, and reviewing the initial brainstorming words and phrases. Students participated in literature groups to discuss and retell fiction stories. Students spent time daily in writing workshops which provided for practice and sharing of their written responses to literature. They made up their own stories about elephants and collected elephant jokes and riddles. Students responded to the books about elephants that they read at home in a variety of ways. Math skills were used to generate new meaning for the concepts of size and weight used in the elephant fiction and non-fiction materials. During science, students compared and researched the size of mammals. Reading, writing, and literature were used as a vehicle through which learning occurred. (Three figures showing the cloze procedure, semantic mapping, and fiction discussion sheets are included. Eleven references are included as well as 13 tradebook references used in the thematic unit.) (MG)

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Diane M. Vivian

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INSIGHTS into open education

# A Thematic Literary Unit: Using Literature Across the Curriculum in an Elementary Classroom

by

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"Think Big" is a thematic literary unit, using literature about elephants in a holistic way and attempting to cross the curriculum into the content areas of science and math. It expands my personal goal to implement literature units into a primary-level reading workshop as a way of extending the basal reading series, but also to provide appropriate and supportive instruction in a cooperative, more interactive learning environment. Activities or experiences presented are either open-ended (appropriate for all the students in the class), shared or partner read, or multi-leveled (varied activities/experiences planned for students with different levels of language and communication development).

This unit theme was planned by weeks, not days, and was intended for a month or longer of activities. A theme often needs the potential to develop with time, both in the planning stages and in the time students work with it.

Whole language or integrated curriculum activities can easily be developed around a single theme. It becomes a sensible way to unite learning that occurs in various subject areas. In the selection of this particular theme our second grade science book, with two chapters on classifying and contrasting animal groups, provided a natural link to literature about animals or certain animals of interest to students of this age group. Then the next criteria to consider was the availability of material in non-fictional and fictional literature.

Availability of books can be a motivational start to a literary theme or it can be a limiting factor to its potential development. As a result of some past thematic experiences, our school's second grades had several multiple copies of literature/tradebooks pertaining to specific animals, cutting across genres and levels of readability. This collection of books, of course, prepared a base for development of a curricular topic about some animals. Although tradebooks vary from school to school within a district, literature material can be drawn from a month long check-out from the public library, parent-teacher group funding, school district instructional services monies, and from your own "discretionary fund" purchases. For a class of, say, twenty-five students, we needed at least twenty-five hardback or paperback books on a topic. The books could be single copies, double copies, a packet of six identical paperbacks, or ten to fifteen same copies of read-along or informational books.

Encouraging students to find and assist in discovering books for a topic would be another means for gathering literature/tradebooks about a theme. Some students might make a book display with their captions or put materials upright in a shoebox as their own miniature library of materials for that topic.

**Classroom Procedures**

Even though a reading workshop as part of the students' total reading program was the original focus of this theme, the additional goals of making a reading-writing connection, crossing the curriculum with literature, using a student's choice to promote reading, and creating an atmosphere

that encourages students to communicate with each other and with the teacher about books evolved and broadened the concept of reading beyond the instructional texts.

**Non-Fiction Reading**

To stimulate interest and to assess what students already knew about the topic of elephants, as well as discover any misconceptions about elephants, I gave an "Elephant Fact Test." Students indicated a choice of answer on this test by thumbs up for true, thumbs down for false.

What do YOU know about elephants?

1. Most elephants come from Africa.
2. A man can outrun an elephant.
3. Elephants are the largest of all animals.
4. An elephant's trunk is its best weapon.
5. Tusks grow back if they are broken.
6. An elephant's trunk has only one use.
7. An elephant's skin is an inch or more thick.
8. Elephants can't run or gallop.
9. Elephants are afraid of mice.
10. An elephant can smell water three miles away.

A further informational, diagnostic tool for this teacher was "brainstorming" what the students already knew about elephants. Brainstorming here was a technique to share ideas within a low-risk group situation. I recorded the students' responses to the question, "What do YOU know about elephants," and later put their words, phrases or sentences on 3" by 9" cards. These cards were then hung up on masking tape strips which were fastened to the wall or chalkboard. Responses during a brainstorming session usually encourage the students to risk participation because there is no value judgment by the teacher. Using these class ideas, the teacher can easily direct (and/or correct) new learning about elephants.

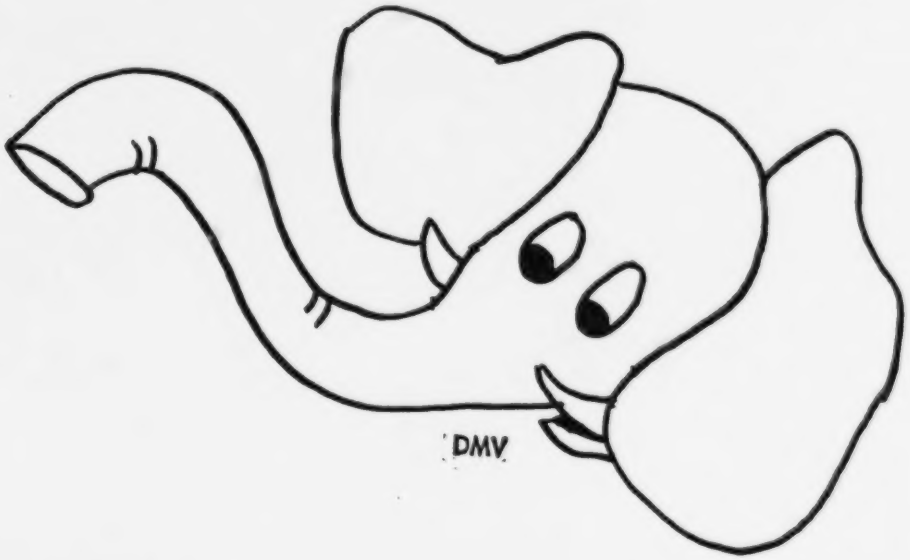
Elephant (A New true book) (Posell, 1982) provided a source of content reading and nonfictional knowledge for the students. It was either read with the teacher or with a partner. Then teacher-prepared cloze procedure sheets were used to review and confirm factual material after each chapter. (See Figure 1- Cloze Procedure) I illustrated the concept of this cloze procedure page by preparing a transparency of the first sheet and "worked through" the page with the students, enabling them to see that other words could be used to make sense, even if the first letter of a word was given. Students then worked with partners or the teacher and later shared their sheets within small groups.

Cloze procedure, as I'm using it here, occurs when a word, deliberately left out of a text, is filled in by the reader of the text. The students were not given a list of words from which to choose, so they supplied the missing words in the sentence and in the paragraph. The informational material was rich in contextual clues, yet the students were encouraged to check out their predictions of the missing words with graphophonic cues as well as semantic cues. The students benefitted from this activity, not only by going back to the book and rereading some of it, but in understanding the reading process and in bringing their own thought to the print.

Two postreading activities were helpful in summarizing the real facts about elephants. The whole class reviewed the originally listed "brainstorming" words and phrases about elephants. Then we corrected, confirmed, or added new information to these lists. A semantic mapping (prepared by me, since it's second grade) organized and graphically represented pertinent information about elephants. (See Figure 2 - Semantic Mapping.)

Some students researched other information about elephants, either at home or school, using the "Elephant Fact Test" to correct false statements or tell us why or how the statement was true. Older elementary students could present information about the problem of survival for this giant of beasts, since the increasing demand in the

Figure 1 - Cloze Procedure




WHERE DO THEY COME FROM? PAGE 5

ELEPHANTS COME FROM EITHER A_____ OR A_____.

WHAT ARE THEY LIKE? PAGES 9 - 16

ELEPHANTS ARE THE L_____ OF ALL LAND ANIMALS. THEY HAVE TH_____ LEGS, BUT S_____ EYES THAT DO NOT SEE WELL.

AN ELEPHANT'S TRUNK IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF ITS BODY. IT IS PART OF ITS N_____ AND T_____ LIP. THE TRUNK IS A T_____ WITH A TAB LIKE A F_____ AT THE END OF IT. ELEPHANTS TAKE CARE OF THEIR TRUNKS.

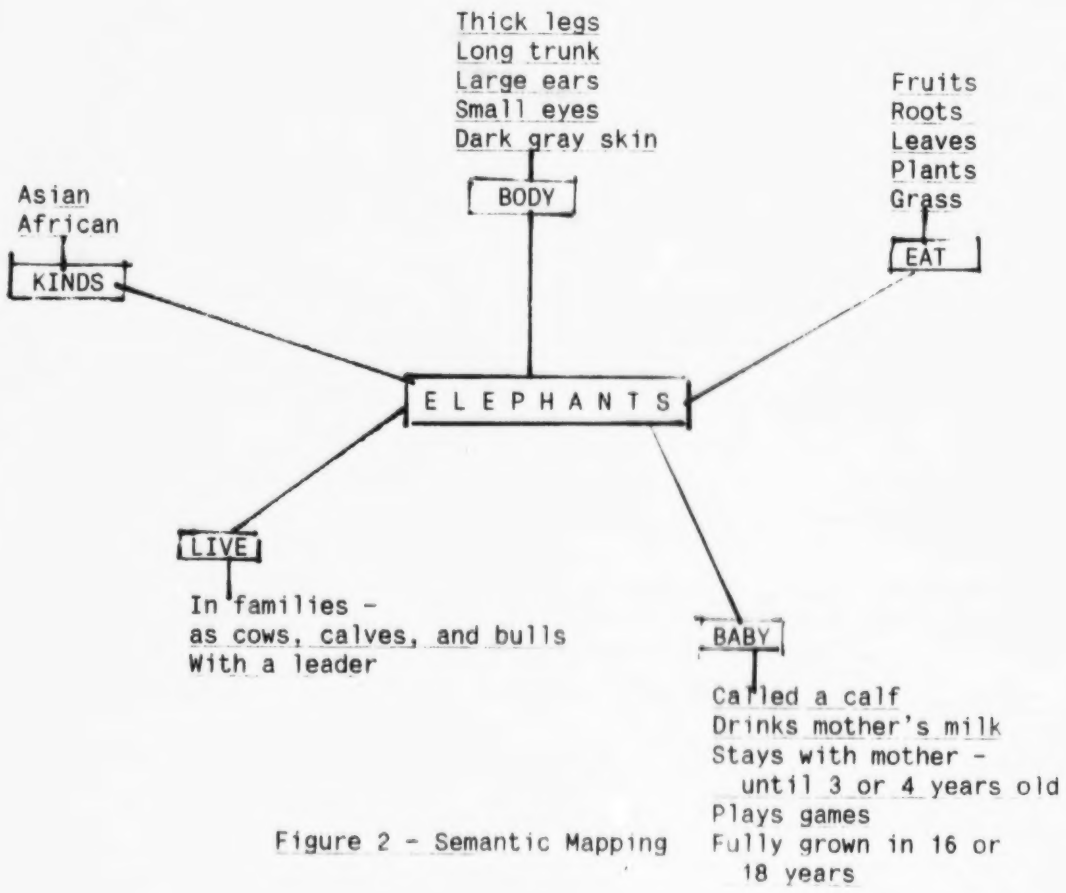



Figure 2 - Semantic Mapping

world for their ivory tusks is endangering the species.

**Fiction Reading**

To introduce elephant fiction stories to the class I read them the book, The Ant and the Elephant (Peet, 1972). The students verbally retold the story, with the teacher monitoring the sequence of story events. Throughout the second week of this literary unit, the teacher read most of the preselected and available multiples of fiction books to the students in preparation for literary grouping in the classroom. Brief discussions about the title, author, plot, and subject or characters were held after each oral reading. Students then chose their first and second choices from a typed listing of the books I read. This choice later involved them in literary group discussions of that particular book. The limitations of this free choice of books may be in the number of available multiple copies. It is important that all students have their own copies of a chosen book. Having their own book promotes personal reading as well as assuring that every reader can attend to print.

After their choice of books, students read silently during two or more S.S.R. (Sustained Silent Reading) times. During and at the end of each S.S.R. time, students jotted down or listed pages, on an "elelphant" or "peanut" bookmark, of any unclear parts, unknown words, and/or how the reading went for them at this time. I also asked them to put down on the back of the bookmark the page number of a passage/paragraph that they would like to read aloud to me. This bookmark became valuable to me for further discussion of reading strategies and for student accountability.

Next, students selecting the same book were paired with a partner for a shared reading of the book. This rereading of their book provided an opportunity for oral practice of the language of the story. At the end of the partner reading, the students worked together on teacher-prepared discussion sheets. (See Figures 3a, 3b, 3c - Fiction Discussion Sheet) These discussion sheets, ranging from numbering the sentences in the correct order to working with story grammar elements to completing cloze procedure summaries, developed a format for sharing and dialoguing later in the whole group discussion of their books. Grades 4-6 probably could start this discussion within their group; conversely, primary grades need more teacher modeling and adult input.

Students who have read the same book then came together with me to discuss the book. Possible dialogue with second grade in a literary group might include:

- Would you like to share something with us?
- What do you think the title means? How does it catch your interest?
- Who were the main characters in the book? What did they do in the story?
- What did you like or not like in the book? Why do you like the story? Does it remind you of another story? Which story?
- What was the problem in the story? How was the problem solved?
- Did you recognize any story patterns (rhyme/rhythm, cumulative, interlocking, repetitive, time sequence, main character) in the pictures or in the story?
- Prepared discussion sheets as previously cited.

These literature groups helped students become more familiar and reflective with fiction books, and appreciative of different types of children's literature. I found that the use of literature and literature groups in the curriculum increased students' interest in reading literature in general.

**Reading/Writing Connection**

Time is set aside daily in my class for independent writing. Writing workshop provided the practice of another process for students and for sharing their written responses to literature with others and with me. Since reading and writing are

Figure 3a - Fiction Discussion Sheet

DMV

THE ANT AND THE ELEPHANT BY BILL PEET

1. WHO ARE THE TWO MAIN CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY?

2. WHERE DOES THIS STORY TAKE PLACE?

3. IS THIS STORY REAL OR MAKE-BELIEVE?

4. WHAT ANIMALS WERE IN TROUBLE OR HAD A PROBLEM?

   A. THE R_____

   B. THE L_____

   C. THE G_____

   D. THE H_____

   E. THE T_____

   F. THE A_____

   G. AND THE E_____

5. WHICH ANIMALS WERE MOST HELPFUL? TELL US WHY YOU THINK THAT THESE ANIMALS WERE HELPFUL.

Figure 3b-Fiction Discussion Sheet

DMV

ZOO BABIES: ELMER THE ELEPHANT BY GEORGEANNE IRVINE

1. WHO ARE THE MAIN ELEPHANT CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY?

2. WHERE DOES THE STORY TAKE PLACE?

3. IS THIS STORY REAL OR MAKE-BELIEVE?

   TELL US WHY YOU THINK THE STORY IS REAL OR WHY YOU THINK IT IS MAKE-BELIEVE.

4. WHO TELLS US THIS STORY?

5. WHAT PART OF AN ELEPHANT'S BODY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT AND IS USED IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS?

   NAME 3 WAYS THAT THIS ELEPHANT BODY PART IS USED.

   1. _____

   2. _____

   3. _____

6. WHY DO ELEPHANTS HAVE BIG EARS?

Figure 3c -Fiction Discussion Sheet

DMV

LITTLE WILD ELEPHANT BY ANNA MICHEL

PUT THESE SENTENCES IN THE CORRECT ORDER. NUMBER YOUR SENTENCES.

_____ ONCE LITTLE ELEPHANT PLAYED A TRICK ON HIS MOTHER BY HIDING BEHIND A TREE AND SQUEALING.

_____ BROTHER ELEPHANT, WHO WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD, FINALLY LEAVES THE FAMILY.

_____ A FEW HOURS AFTER HE WAS BORN, LITTLE ELEPHANT WAS STRONG ENOUGH TO WALK.

_____ BY THE TIME HE WAS ONE YEAR OLD, LITTLE ELEPHANT WAS LEARNING TO DRINK WITH HIS TRUNK.

_____ LITTLE ELEPHANT GOT HIS FIRST MUD AND DUST BATH.

_____ WHEN HE WAS FOUR YEARS OLD, LITTLE ELEPHANT HAD A NEW BABY SISTER.

_____ ONE DAY LITTLE ELEPHANT WILL BE READY TO LEAVE HIS FAMILY OR TO TRAVEL ALONE.

supportive processes of each other in the language arts curriculum, it seemed timely, after working with elephant fiction stories, to use these story structures in chants, verses, and other predictable frameworks.

Reading aloud elephant jokes from The Ella Fannie Elephant Riddle Book by Ann Bishop (1974) afforded an opportunity to write elephant jokes.

- Why do baby elelphants need stilts?
  To kiss giraffes.
- Why are elephants gray?
  So you can tell them apart from bluebirds.
- Why do elephants take a walk?
  To get their extra-size.

Students asked their family if they could remember any elephant riddles or jokes. These jokes or riddles from home, as well as the students' riddle writings and illustrations, made a popular "big book" and class book.

Students also made up their own stories about how the elephant could have gotten a long trunk or big ears or saggy, wrinkled skin, after hearing and retelling "The Elephant's Child" or "How the Elephant Got His Trunk" and other Just So Stories by Rudyard Kipling (1912). Brainstorming for words that mean "big" or words that describe elephants' appearances and habits aided the sentence structure in these stories, as well as enlarged their reading vocabulary and word meaning.

Using the caption "Think Big," students participated in a home reading project where they read public or school library books or books from home about elephants. They could respond to the book by illustrating a scene from the book, by writing a different ending, by making a poster advertising the story, by presenting the story with puppets, by listing all the action words in the story, by collecting magazine pictures and words relating to the story, or by making and illustrating a dictionary of new words in the story. Some students liked to keep booklets of their "Think Big" books, recording the title, author, non-fiction or fiction status, and the main idea of the book.

Even though these ideas are presented here under a separate heading, writing pervades the theme to communicate and express knowledge and thoughts. Interspersing activities of writing throughout this unit or using writing as cumulating projects encourages students to synthesize and apply what they've learned from the literature. The important principle is reinforcing wherever possible the connection between reading and writing.

**Across the Curriculum in Math and Science**

Math is often the most difficult subject to integrate into a theme's whole curriculum approach. Skills such as classifying, predicting, measuring, graphing, estimating, and problem solving perform roles in understanding concepts of math and science. In this unit they were used to generate new meaning for the concepts of size and weight used in the elephant non-fiction and fiction materials.

The book, The Great Big Elephant and the Very Small Elephant, by Barbara Seuling (1977) provided our introduction to size, capacity, and weight. Estimating the mass or weight of an object engaged the students in new active learning endeavors. Pairs of students took turns holding a 1-kilogram weight (metric) and 1-pound weight (customary) in one hand and two math workbooks in the other in order to see that they are fairly close in weight. Then they used scales to confirm their estimations or predictions. We continued to pick up other objects (a pencil, chair, piece of chalk, one book) around the room and decided if each weighs more or less than 1 kilogram / 1 pound or about the same, checking our predictions as we progressed through the lesson. Students could also estimate their weight, but in the context of how close their guesses were to the correct number.

For comparing weights within a science experiment I filled five pint-sized milk cartons with rice—one carton 1/4 full of rice, one 1/2 full, and one 3/4 full, one completely full, and one empty. Then I taped the cartons shut and randomly labeled the cartons A, B, C, D, and E and placed them on our science table, where students could work in pairs and arrange the five cartons in order from the lightest to the heaviest and from the heaviest to the lightest. (Some students could see without rearranging the containers that this is the reverse pattern.) The students recorded these arangements on paper and gave written answers to which container was the heaviest and which container was the lightest. If they chose, students could also compare and write about the weight of a carton with other objects in the classroom.

On another day, we transferred the learning from this experiment to the science study of the size of mammals. In a primary classroom it was necessary to first identify the different animal classifications, then focus on the one necessary group—the mammal group.

After briefly discussing and charting the characteristics of mammals, we listed the names of many mammals. I recorded their answers on sentence/word strips of paper and put them on chart holders. The students wrote down their "guesses" of the smallest (animal's usual size) to the largest mammal. In grades 4-6, groups of students could take the names of perhaps five animals and research and report the approximate size of their animals to confirm or correct their guesses. For our purposes, we did find a chart, graphing sizes of some mammals.

Further application in science would be to study and compare the largest land mammal, the elephant, to the largest water mammal, the whale. Our school system had already designated multiple copies titled Whales and other sea mammals (A New true book)(Posell, 1982) to second grade for supportive reading.

**Extensions**

Further lesson plans might include the students' drawings of elephants living in a jungle, in the zoo, or with a circus. An elephant paper-bag head or construction paper mask lends itself to role-playing and drama.

The book, That's What Friends Are For, by Florence Parry Heide (1968) nicely introduced a cumulative story pattern. In this story, Theodore, the elephant, asks his friends how to get to the other side of the forest. Each friend has advice added on to the previous friend's advice. A version of this story is also in Rainbow Shower, a second grade Scott, Foresman reader.

Bulletin boards called "You are a H U G E Success" highlighted some of the students' writing and drawings.

We introduced a white elephant to our room by showing a vase and telling the students that it was a white elephant. This led to a discussion of expressions and the figurative language of "white elephants." The students asked if their family owned any. It may be possible to plan a white elephant sale with the library to buy more multiple copies of selected literature paperbacks.

**Closing Words**

In classrooms in which basal reading series are used as core instructional material, it's important to motivate students to read more. Some of this extended reading is ten or more minutes of S.S.R. reading; some of it is in the form of reading aloud by the teacher; and some of it was done outside of school when we had home reading projects. In order to create extra reading time (beyond reading groups) in the classroom, I started to implement literature units in a "Reading Workshop."

The rationale behind these literature units was:

- to create extra reading time in the classroom,
- to appreciate reading through the use of literature,
- to cross levels of readability,
- to use a student's choice in promoting reading,
- and to create a relatively risk-free atmosphere that encourages students to communicate with each other and with the teacher about reading.

Originally, I had used literature for teaching literary story patterns in writing. These literary patterns in children's literature were read aloud to students. Students would often internalize the patterns and, although they may not call it, i.e., a cumulative pattern, they would say, "that story works/sounds like _____." It became helpful not only in the process of writing, but in story retellings in reading.

Then a thematic approach evolved, initially because of the available multiple copies of some primary paperback books at second grade level. The availability of these materials and resources, along with a knowledge of the core content for this grade level, helped me plan for a number of thematic literature units. In preparation for large and small group instruction within a literary unit, I used reading, writing, and literature as the vehicle through which learning occurred, and the content of other subjects through which the integration of the curriculum became holistic. Teacher and students soon viewed writing and literature as tools for learning across the curriculum. A continuing goal for me will be to search for other literature tradebooks and to organize material relevant to further curricular topics.

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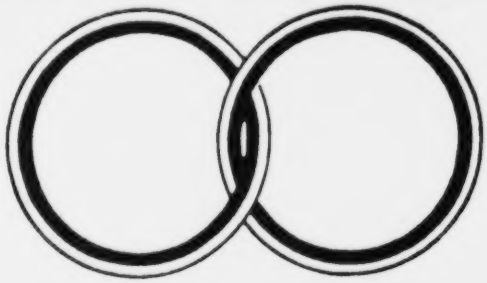

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